

CONGRESSIONAL VISIT

Americans bring hope to Afghans

● This nation needs to stay linked to aid and development efforts there.

By TOM ALLEN

The visual images of my trip to Afghanistan will always be with me.

The Afghan children at an orphanage who sang to welcome our congressional delegation and asked only for "pens" and "pencils," never money. The mothers crowded beside their sick children in the "best" children's hospital in Kabul because nursing care was nonexistent. The tiny sidewalk shops in Kabul in front of buildings blown apart by the civil war of the early 1990s. The armed men stationed at random checkpoints north of Kabul with automatic weapons over their shoulders.

MAINE VOICES

I won't forget the Americans. The young soldier guiding us around the U.S. base at Karshi-Khanabad in Uzbekistan who told me she was proud to help supply the Special Operations forces. They had just dropped into the snow-covered mountains of southern Afghanistan to dig a concentration of hard-core al-Qaida forces out of their caves. They had the high spirits and determination of enlisted men and women and officers who know that our security depends on their performance.

The land is both stunning and forbidding. Spectacular mountains rise from valleys which are dry and dusty from four years of drought. The roads and bridges are unbelievably bad, the result of 23 years of war and neglect. We drove through a stream on the road from Bagram to Kabul because the bridge had been blown up.

The people of Afghanistan have

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rep. Tom Allen, a Democrat, is a member of the House Armed Services Committee. He represents Maine's 1st District and joined a nine-member House delegation which visited Afghanistan, Uzbekistan and Krygyzstan March 2-5.

every right to have lost hope. No other country has been as devastated in the last 30 years, most recently by the barbaric rule of the Taliban. Its primary exports have been drugs and terrorism.

No effective and responsible central government has functioned for decades. One of every four children dies before the age of five. The adult life expectancy is 46 years. Only 4 percent of the women are literate, and only 27 percent of the men.

But we saw light in their eyes and smiles on their faces. Children waved as our identifiably American vehicles passed. Adults nodded and smiled when we met. The vast majority of Afghans, we were told again and again, are delighted and grateful that the Americans have come. They now have another chance to build a unified country and a better life for themselves. They have hope again.

The challenges ahead are almost beyond comprehension. Security will not become a reality without a national army and police force, but tribal, regional, and ethnic rivalries make that task daunting. The government is just beginning to pay its employees, which is an obvious necessity.

Economically, Afghanistan is perhaps the poorest country in the world. The average annual income is \$250 per year. Micro loans, seeds and fertilizer, and labor intensive road

building and canal maintenance projects are the types of approaches that can work in a country so desperately poor.

Politically, a stronger central government is essential for internal progress and global credibility. Our nine-member congressional delegation met with Hamid Karzai, the chairman of the Afghan Interim Authority. A brilliant, Western-educated member of the Pashtun tribe from the south, Karzai has a vision for a unified Afghanistan that overcomes its historic regional and tribal conflicts.

He cannot succeed without Western aid and support. But parochial internal politics and external pressures from neighboring countries threaten to undermine him. Still, at our meeting his optimism was evident. Karzai is convinced the Afghan people overwhelmingly want stronger central government and less factionalism.

The attacks of Sept. 11 were carried out by 19 al-Qaida terrorists trained in Afghanistan. They caused more U.S. casualties by an external enemy in one day than ever before in our history. We cannot, for our security and the well-being of the Afghan people, let anarchy and repression define their country again.

Though America pulled out of the region after the Soviets withdrew, we must not make the same mistake again. The reconstruction effort will be supported globally, but will require many years and billions of dollars.

The orphanage/child care center we visited serves over a thousand children. Our delegation resolved to provide them with thousands of pens and pencils, as well as other supplies.

Opportunities to help in other ways are many. Our two countries are linked forever in history. We need to stay committed to reconstruction in order to build on the Afghans' optimism and make our common future brighter.

—Special to the Press Herald